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ABSTRACT

Two elements of constructivist pedagogy warrant attention with respect to second language (L2) learning: collaborative dialogue and learner decision-making. These two elements in instruction bring about experiential and task oriented classrooms. The constructivist approach to the L2 classroom foregrounds conceptual development focused on meaningful content, using raw data and primary sources as well as abundant information encoded in different formats, and various materials that can be physically manipulated by students to expedite inquiry and hypothesizing. In an optimal situation, learners have abundant print and electronic texts, ample flexible opportunities to write, single-student and collaborative projects, fact-checking circles, individual review and fact summaries, oral readings of a range of text types authored by writers inside and outside the class, team debates, and peer revision of student writing. Content area material is frequently incorporated. Implementing L2 constructivist techniques creates a shift in teacher authority and conventional classroom interactions, and requires an openness to inquiry on the teacher's part. Contains 27 references. (MSE)

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Constructing L2

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Two elements of constructivist pedagogy warrant attention with respect to L2: collaborative dialogue and learner decision-making. Regarding student-to-student dialogue and other cooperative strategies, L2 theorists stress how language production results in social "construction" of conceptual development. Crandall (1993) notes how cooperative learning "encourages students to interact ... share their insights, test hypotheses, and jointly construct knowledge" (p. 117). With regard to decision-making, since constructivist theory specifies that students assume responsibility about what they are learning (Luria, 1976, 1982; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1985; Bruner, 1990), the instructor's role is motivational, helping learners concentrate on self-directed hypothesis-building, discovering and rediscovering principles underpinning cognitive and linguistic processes (see Richard-Amato & Snow, 1992; Short, 1993, 1994). Therefore, learner decision-making, along with collaborative dialogue, brings about experiential and task-oriented classrooms in which the L2 learner "does science" (Roseberry, Warren & Conant 1992), sharpens language and academic skills relevant to humanities problem-sets (Enright & McCloskey, 1988), and manufactures as well as solves math problems (Spanos, Rhodes, Dale & Crandall, 1988).

The constructivist approach to the L2 classroom, then, foregrounds conceptual development focused on meaningful content, employing raw data and primary sources as well as abundant information encoded in different formats (texts, graphics, multimedia) and various materials that can be physically manipulated by students to expedite inquiry and hypothesizing. Kaufman and Grennon Brooks (1996) counsel L2 teachers to involve learners in hands-on

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projects and cognitive tasks such as question-and-response and debate, encouraging students to come up with new information and even contradictory evidence vis a vis their original hypotheses.

An Exemplary Case

To illustrate a case of learner decision-making and collaborative interaction within an L2 composition classroom, along with an oversupply of reading (standard and electronic texts) and ample, flexible opportunities to write, learners also enter into several singleton and collaborative ancillary ventures: fact-checking circles; group as well as individual review and summary of facts; oral readings of a range of related texts authored by writers outside and inside the class; team debates; peer revision of student texts, including pair-work-editing. These overlapping tasks all together add up to solo and group achievements pitched toward visiting and revisiting generative ideas and aggregate themes, providing learners multiple perspectives on language and information.

Learner decision-making and collaboration call for students to engage meaningful subject matter, and thus we find elementary programs that merge L2 with art, music, physical education (Met, 1991); elementary and secondary programs that feature L2 with math and science (Fatham, Quinn & Kessler, 1992); and secondary programs that mix L2 skills development with social sciences (Short, 1994). Recent constructivist tertiary-level L2 approaches include student-selected field research (Howell, 1996), language-enriched algebraic projects (Kaufman & Grennon Brooks, 1996), and clinical case studies on the Internet (Kimball, 1997).

Practical Constructivism

Putting L2 constructivist stratagems into practice exacts a high price with respect to teachers' authority and other classroom conventions. Because learner

input is integral to the theory, constructivist syllabi remain receptive to student-generated tasks and projects developed in the spontaneous flow of learners' interactions and deepening interests. Inductive open-endedness aptly describes the temperament required of an L2 teacher who would introduce constructivist strategies. Rather than turning to a reading text, say, with the defined aim of covering particular pages followed by evaluative language exercises, an educator operating on constructivist principles might propose a portion of the text be examined. This would be an exploratory pedagogic gesture to assess how the text and other curricular elements could best be arrayed for students to probe their conceptual understanding and develop their own notions of how to proceed. Depending on learners' linguistic competencies, students guided by their instructor might choose different options: analyzing the text's main and supportive ideas, comparing those ideas with students' opinions, contrasting textual assertions with other sources. Again, depending on results of one or more of these options, the instructor and students may decide to continue reading the original text or follow other lines of activity.

Energies that foster a constructivist open-ended approach are continually dispersed among L2 learners and then reconcentrated by those learners in processes of making sense. Accordingly, language development within a constructivist regime emerges from a conceptual search for meaning. This search is occasioned within cycles of inquiry leading to student hypothesizing and further inquiry animated by a learning environment co-created by the instructor and the instructed.

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